

Career Profile: Jonnell Robinson



Jonnell Robinson is a firm believer in the power of serendipity. Armed with a master's degree in public health, Jonnell was busy working on her Ph.D. in medical geography at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill when things began to go awry. On track to go to India to conduct field research on HIV and tuberculosis, her VISA failed to come through and other complications arose. Her immediate plans derailed, a job opportunity for a "community geographer" at Syracuse University came up. Jonnell got the job and ultimately reinvented her dissertation project to focus on community geography.

After years of both working full-time as Community Geographer and working on her new dissertation, Jonnell received her Ph.D. in 2010 and recently became an assistant professor at Syracuse University, where the former staff position of community geographer has now been elevated to a tenure-track position – one of the first its kind.

"I think we coined the term 'Community Geographer' here," she says. "Of course, there's been public participation in GIS projects for some time, but we're not just relying on GIS. We're really focused on mixed-methods to get at a problem, and every project we do is one-hundred percent community-defined. We use qualitative methods just as much as we use quantitative methods. And whatever problem we're approaching, it's never driven by faculty expertise in a particular area, like public transportation. That's the beauty of it: I act as facilitator and pull in faculty and students from all over campus – public health, urban studies – and bring them to a project. The community also works with us to define the methods we use to tackle it. It's good for geography because it shows people all over campus how geography is applicable to their area of study. Real problems are complex, and often no one discipline can tackle these complex problems." Leaders at academic departments and universities all across the U.S. are in the midst of a significant transformation in society – how academic institutions understand and practice their scholarly mission. As expectations have grown that research should be more directly relevant and socially engaged, particularly in regards to the communities in which they reside, it's been no easy matter to find ways to carry that out in practice. This is especially true since the traditional academic model has valued research publications over "service." But the Chancellor of Syracuse University, Nancy Cantor, is willing to break the mold and find new ways to envision "scholarship in action." From a collaboration between the geography department, social service providers, community organizations, and public agencies, all of whom were involved in a successful community-university initiative called the Syracuse Hunger Project, the community geographer position was born.

Cantor identified the new position as an opportunity to reconsider the metrics upon which tenure is based, seeing participatory, community-driven research output and community impact as legitimate scholarly work, in addition to peer-reviewed publications.

The Geography Department also rewrote its definition of tenure requirements to expand its understanding of meaningful scholarly engagement.

Gamma Theta Upsilon recently added Jonnell to the active speakers list of the Visiting Geographical Scientist Program, following a successful and highly popular visit she made to Georgia State and Columbus State universities as an invited speaker, where she engaged with university leaders and demonstrated the power of geography to help local communities solve real world problems while engaging students in meaningful scholarship. Both Georgia State and Columbus State recently advertised positions in the AAG's "jobs in geography" (JIG) – the first two community geography positions ever to appear there.

"This is a new model, but we're not creating it in a vacuum," says Robinson. "Last year, Tim Hawthorne organized four sessions on community geography at the AAG, and they were all standing room only. This year in Los Angeles there will be five sessions on how to use it in the classroom, how to engage students in real community-based work and real world problems, and we expect them to be packed."

This profile was published in 2012 by Dr. Jim Ketchum